

Planning for Wokingham Borough

Before the election I was asked about my attitude to the possible construction of more homes in Grazeley when Wokingham next needs to find new areas for development after completing the four large areas currently underway.

I said I would want to know what investment would be needed in schools, surgeries, roads and other public facilities and how these would be paid for. I would also want some reassurance that making a plan around one main development for the next plan period would not leave us vulnerable to landowners and developers persuading Planning Inspectors to grant them additional planning permission elsewhere in the Borough. The Council may wish to concentrate the growth in one major new settlement but needs to know this will not be overturned.

I have been in discussions with Councillors and Ministers about these issues since the election. This post is to confirm that so far I have not seen details on how either of these two matters would be resolved, so I am still pressing for more information. There is no great urgency, as there are still many planning permissions outstanding for the current plan period, where the Council has identified where it wishes the new homes to go. I remain open minded over how many homes could be accommodated in our area in the next plan period, and where they might best be delivered. I am very conscious of the strains placed on all our infrastructure by the pace of building under the current plan.

I will be supporting the Council on appeal where developers are trying to secure permissions outside the approved places under the current plan and where the Council asks for my assistance.

So the EU budget rebate is at risk

In the endless referendum debates and interviews about the money I always stressed that the £350 m was an accurate official figure for the gross amount. I also quoted the various net amounts if they were relevant to the specific question.

Quite often Remain speakers claimed we do not send the gross amount, but retain the rebate at home. We have further confirmation from the EU that we do send the gross amount and have to reclaim the rebate later. Now there are stories that the EU will not pay the last rebate owing. In that case we should only send the contribution net of estimated rebate.

We also read that the EU thinks we should accept some future liability for

Ukrainian loans from the EU. This reveals an interesting EU worry. EU policy towards the Ukraine has been problematic. The wide ranging Association Agreement was part of the reason for political change in Ukraine which led to the loss of Crimea and to a bitter civil war which damaged the economy. The EU and the IMF were drawn into offering substantial financial support for the troubled economy.

It is difficult to see why the UK when out of the EU should have to stand behind loans the EU has made when we will not be receiving any financial gains the EU might make on other assets.

If this is the best the EU can come up with we should continue to plan to leave under the WTO option. The UK should not make any concessions.

Timing of postings

I moderate this site, when I can spare a few minutes to do so.

I post short contributions first.

I delete postings that make unsubstantiated allegations about named people or companies for legal reasons. Mr Corbyn gets the same protection as Mrs May.

I delete contributions using bad language or smearing groups of people. Links from sources I have not checked will delay a posting and may result in deletion. A link to a source like ONS or the World Bank can be helpful and does not delay a posting.

Housing at the centre of the debate

There has been a tussle going on over how to finance a larger housebuilding programme. The Prime Minister announced her intention to build more homes in her Conference speech, but was only able to agree modest sums of public money for the affordable housing she had in mind. The Treasury is seeking to limit the expenditure of taxpayer cash, and to look at other ways of relaxing the housing market to foster more development.

This week we read that the independent Office of National Statistics who put the £70bn of Housing Association debt onto the government's balance sheet in 2015 is now going to take it off. The Office is apparently now satisfied that the Housing Associations are sufficiently independent of government so their debt is not part of the state's obligations. This follows legislative changes

concerning Housing Association finances and management.

This is significant because it removes Treasury concerns that more Housing Association borrowing impedes reducing state borrowing as a percentage of GDP, one of the government's chosen targets. It will allow Housing Associations to borrow more to build more, subject to their own balance sheets and credit worthiness. It means that the Communities Secretary's plea to borrow more at these current low interest rates to invest in housing has just got a bit easier for part of the housing sector.

Thursday we saw the PM out and about highlighting the housing issue. The Communities Secretary made a speech urging Councils to achieve more with their local plans. There remains the issue of the capacity of the housebuilding industry. Successful large companies dominate the activity, and have their own reasons to limit the pace of growth in their activity. They worry about maintaining standards, and recruiting and training sufficient skilled people. Local Colleges can help by putting on sufficient places for building trades courses, and promoting these to potential students.

As the government turns its attention to more affordable housing it is important it includes enough affordable housing to buy, as that is still the preferred tenure for most people. It also needs to expand shared ownership and rent to mortgage models to create additional pathways to ownership.

David Davis was right to urge the EU to engage on the future relationship for their own sake

The EU is trying to stick with the idea that you can settle the Irish border issue without deciding the basis of our future trading. They hope that by delaying trade talks they will get more money out of the UK. The Brexit Secretary was right to offer no money and to remind them that a Free Trade deal is in their self interest.